



Emperor Relief

Robert Adams

Not on display

Title/Description: Emperor Relief

Artist/Maker: Robert Adams

Born: 1964

Object Type: Relief

Materials: Paint, Plywood

Accession Number: 31603

Historic Period: 20th century

Production Place: Britain, England, Europe

Credit Line: Bequeathed by Joyce and Michael Morris, 2014

Emperor Relief is unusual in Adam's practice in 1964 in that it is made from wood. Whereas his earlier career had seen him carve in wood, from about 1956 onwards, he had started to focus on welded and then cast metal. The relief is also unusual in having painted elements - black shapes at the top and white at the bottom. Adams did not usually incorporate colour in his works, instead allowing the metal and wood to be their natural colours.

The shapes in *Emperor Relief* incorporate a playful element. The black shapes at the top are enclosed in a white grid, as if they are set up for a board game. The white shapes at the bottom are stacked casually as though they've slipped down the board. The white shapes are more irregular than the more formal shapes at the top. Whereas in much of Adams' work, he created counterbalances and asymmetry within the form, in *Emperor Relief*, the balance of colour and shape is found within a regular rectangular frame. A note by the former owner of the relief, Michael Morris, indicates that the relief is based on a photograph of a Japanese Emperor and their family. As a close acquaintance of Adams, this information would have come from the artist.

Adams had been creating reliefs throughout most of his sculptural career, first creating reliefs on a domestic scale in the 1950s, before receiving architectural commissions for monumental outdoor reliefs from the 1960s. In his commitment to the relief, he was closely aligned to some of the British constructivist artists who he exhibited alongside from the 1950s. These artists included Victor Pasmore, Mary Martin, Anthony Hill and John Ernest, who created many reliefs to explore how the artwork would interact with the surrounding space. In this, they were influenced by the American artist Charles Biederman, who wrote about the importance of the relief as a new art form (rather

than a hybrid of painting and sculpture) in his book *Art as the Evolution of Visual Knowledge* in 1948. [1] American constructivist and kinetic artist George Rickey dedicated a section in his 1968 book *Constructivism: Origins and Evolution* to reliefs, with much focus on the British artists, demonstrating how important the relief form was to them. [2]

The Sainsbury Centre has the most important body of work by Robert Adams in a public collection in the UK with 27 sculptures and 8 works on paper. They were acquired by collectors Joyce and Michael Morris and bequeathed to the Sainsbury Centre in 2016.

Tania Moore, May 2021

[1] Charles Biederman, *Art as the Evolution of Visual Knowledge* (Minnesota: Publisher not identified, 1948).

[2] George Rickey, *Constructivism: Origins and Evolution* (London: Studio Vista, 1967), pp.117-126.

Exhibitions

'Rhythm and Geometry: Constructivist art in Britain since 1951', Sainsbury Centre, UK, 02/10/2021 - 17/07/2022

'Rhythm and Geometry: Constructivist art in Britain since 1951', Djanogly Art Gallery, UK, 07/03/2023 - 23/07/2023

Further Reading

Alastair Grieve, *The Sculpture of Robert Adams* (London: Henry Moore Foundation and Lund Humphries, 1992), p.65.

Alastair Grieve, *Constructed Abstract Art in England: A Neglected Avant-Garde* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005)

Tania Moore and Calvin Winner (eds.), *Rhythm and Geometry: Constructivist art in Britain since 1951* (Norwich: Sainsbury Centre, 2021), p.67.

Provenance

Bought by Michael Morris from the artist in 1964.

In October 1984, the University of East Anglia accepted a planned bequest from Joyce and Michael Morris (UEA Alumni). Michael died in 2009 and Joyce in December 2014 when the couple's wishes were implemented.

